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Tender Executioner

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Tender Executioner

Rose Postma

My father, who hated the destruction
of all things, built shelves in his shed
to line up pairs of old shoes, collected
glass bottles, tin cans, newspapers
in 50-gallon barrels, drove a 1972 Mercedes
because he liked the feel of the thin
steering wheel beneath his hands. Lovingly
stored old tires in old vans because he wanted
to find their purpose, again, wanted to save
the discards of others. Still remembered at sixty
the childhood memories of teenagers
wantonly beating a car with hammers, of
losing a pocket knife in a Canadian forest.

He likes to make metal yield
to his instruments, likes to feel
the burls along the edge
of a fresh cut, identify metals
by their hue and gloss. Likes
the teeth of a sprocket, the sharp
edge of the round end of a shaft.
Likes the weight of a Leatherman,
a series of knives in his pocket,
the chill of a shotgun stored
in the top of a closet. Likes
the smoothness of possibility
the way I like a well-pressed hem.

In the mezzanine of his shop,
added as an office, a place to store
valuables, he lined up every National
Geographic Magazine published
from 1952 to 1997 and every volume
of the 1975 edition of the World Book
Encyclopedia. In the same way he took
abandoned counters and shelves
from a remodeled Wal-Mart Photo Center
to furnish his shop, he met people.
The Mexican woman who spoke no English,
abandoned by her boyfriend, who gave my mother
a pink bath towel in exchange for a cup

of coffee. Scott and Carl, who he drove each week
to church. The diabetic driver who veered
off the road and cut deep ruts into our lawn.
Daryl, who lived in an RV and made audio
tapes of his music, who when we saw him
parked on the other side of the overpass
on Cottage Road my father would honk twice
and wildly wave from the window
of his Mercedes. The out-of-gas motorist
with a giant, full-color tattoo across his back
of the Virgin Mary being eaten by a lion. *Your father*
my mother says *attracts people* (the word *people*
seems to stick in the space between her tongue
and her teeth). My father uses a giant magnet
to separate the steel chips from the aluminum,
to sort bent nails and screws to the right coffee can.

Perhaps the greatest gift he gave
was teaching me how to grieve. The goat
sold at sale, its stillborn brother he delivered
and tried to resuscitate the way they teach
in a Red Cross swimming class. The countless
hamsters flushed or buried depending on
size, the wild things I caught and tried
to tame: the blue jay, the jack rabbit, the
sparrow. The cats, who despite best efforts,
found the rat poison and curled up under
the house to stiffen. The mice caught
in traps, the squirrels gassed in their burrows.
The rabbits, the dogs, the fish. Even my sister
who only lived for two hours. The act of grief
is the first stage of memory.

Because death is sometimes a duty
for the living to perform, my father
was ordained to dispatch the sick
and dying. The blind dogs, the cats
mangled by cars as they darted across
the road, the sticky deformed newborn
goats, unwilling to live. My father,
unwilling, tender, executioner.

In order to write this poem, I research executioners. Discover they are traditionally shunned, buried apart from the general population. Click here to see the etymology. Click here to see the first known use. Function: noun, definition: one who executes; especially one who puts to death. Click here to see *executioner* defined for children. A father digging a hole in the orchard, alone; especially in the early morning when there is still a slight mist, lunch meat in his pocket, seed cap for hood, condemned dog watching.

I heard a death row warden once say in an interview that the executioner feels a rush of endorphins when the lever is flipped, trapdoor released, needle plunged. I need to know for a fact that my father never once was glad, euphoric, when he shoveled clods of dirt over still-warm bodies. I am certain I know the answer but have never asked.

I call one of my sisters to see if she remembers the cats. She doesn't.

But dad's right here want me to ask him?
There is a pause after every phrase as she relays the information
being shouted at her across the grinding of his lathe
he says
the neighbors had too many cats, too many to feed, they kept multiplying
they asked him to help he didn't like the idea of a bag, in the river
weighted with stones he made a box and jerry rigged a hose to the
exhaust pipe of the car he says he thought they would just go to sleep
he says the scratches on his forearm reminded him for a week
of how the living will do anything to live he says
if he had to do it again he'd find a different way.

My father, who kept his unloaded gun in the high branches of his closet, who didn't know the tickle on his cheek was a black widow until he flung it to the floor, who crushed it's darkness in a tissue. My father, who knew it could just as well been the spider who skittered fast away.